

Norms without Power? Evaluating ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific's Role in Shaping the Indo-Pacific

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) as a normative framework that articulates ASEAN's vision of an inclusive, rules-based, and cooperative regional order amid intensifying great power rivalry. Drawing on constructivist theory and the norm life cycle model proposed by Finnemore and Sikkink, the study assesses AOIP's role as a case of norm entrepreneurship and its stalled progression beyond the norm emergence phase. Through content and discourse analysis of AOIP documents, summit declarations, and member state responses, the paper reveals how ASEAN's structural limitations, such as consensus-based decision-making, institutional weakness, and internal political divergence, undermine the operationalisation of AOIP principles. Despite rhetorical support from ASEAN and external partners, AOIP lacks effective enforcement mechanisms, institutional anchorage, and shared political will, rendering it a "norm without power." The paper argues that for AOIP to evolve into a more consequential framework, ASEAN must embrace incremental institutionalisation, empower norm entrepreneurs, and forge strategic partnerships with like-minded external actors. Ultimately, the research highlights both the promise and limits of normative agency in regional governance, underscoring ASEAN's challenge in navigating between aspirational discourse and geopolitical realities.

Keywords: ASEAN, Indo-Pacific, AOIP, constructivism, norm entrepreneurship, regional order, norm life cycle, institutionalisation, normative power.

ABSTRAK

Tulisan ini mengkaji secara kritis *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* (AOIP) sebagai kerangka normatif yang merumuskan visi ASEAN terhadap tatanan kawasan yang inklusif, berbasis aturan, dan kooperatif di tengah memanasnya rivalitas kekuatan besar. Dengan menggunakan teori konstruktivisme dan model *norm life cycle* yang dikembangkan oleh Finnemore dan Sikkink, studi ini menilai peran AOIP sebagai bentuk *norm entrepreneurship* serta stagnasinya dalam fase awal kemunculan norma. Melalui analisis konten dan wacana terhadap dokumen AOIP, deklarasi KTT, dan respons negara anggota, makalah ini menunjukkan bahwa berbagai keterbatasan struktural ASEAN, seperti pengambilan keputusan berbasis konsensus, kelemahan institusional, dan perbedaan politik internal, menghambat operasionalisasi prinsip-prinsip AOIP. Meskipun mendapatkan dukungan retorik dari ASEAN dan mitra eksternal, AOIP tidak memiliki mekanisme penegakan yang efektif, landasan institusional yang kuat, maupun kemauan politik kolektif, sehingga menjadikannya sebagai "norma tanpa kekuatan." Tulisan ini berargumen bahwa agar AOIP dapat berkembang menjadi kerangka kerja yang lebih berdampak, ASEAN perlu mengadopsi pendekatan institusionalisasi secara bertahap, memberdayakan *norm entrepreneurs*, dan membangun kemitraan strategis dengan aktor eksternal yang sejalan. Pada akhirnya, riset ini menyoroti janji sekaligus keterbatasan dari agensi normatif dalam tata kelola kawasan, serta menekankan tantangan ASEAN dalam menavigasi antara wacana aspiratif dan realitas geopolitik.

Kata kunci: ASEAN, Indo-Pasifik, AOIP, konstruktivisme, norm entrepreneurship, tatanan kawasan, norm life cycle, institusionalisasi, kekuatan normatif.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in 2019 was ASEAN's strategic response to increasing geopolitical rivalry and overlapping visions of regional order presented by major powers. With the rise of the United States' Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), ASEAN faced the threat of being sidelined in a regional architecture shaped by external agendas (Weatherbee, 2020). The growing tensions in the South China Sea, alongside economic vulnerabilities due to external dependencies, further pressured ASEAN to assert its agency. The AOIP was thus born from both strategic necessity and normative ambition. Unlike FOIP or BRI, AOIP was not designed as a power-driven initiative, but rather as a framework built on ASEAN's core principles: openness, inclusivity, respect for international law, and ASEAN centrality (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019). It reflected ASEAN's attempt to offer a cooperative and rules-based vision of the Indo-Pacific that could reduce tensions and preserve regional autonomy in an increasingly polarised environment.

The formulation of AOIP was rooted in ASEAN's traditional method of consensus-based diplomacy. Initial discussions took place informally during ASEAN Summit meetings and foreign ministers' dialogues before being formalized at the 34th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok in 2019 (Sukma, 2020). AOIP emphasizes four key areas: maritime cooperation, connectivity, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and economic and other possible cooperation. These priorities were chosen to reflect ASEAN's desire for functional and inclusive cooperation rather than confrontation. Although AOIP lacks binding mechanisms or enforcement power, it serves as a diplomatic and normative tool for ASEAN to shape regional discourse and promote multilateralism (Heydarian, 2020). Since its launch, ASEAN has engaged with partners such as Japan, India, Australia, and the European Union to operationalise AOIP through capacity-building, connectivity projects, and maritime dialogues, though the progress remains incremental and often overshadowed by great power dynamics (Jain, 2021).

Despite its limitations, AOIP holds promise as a soft power-driven regional framework that reaffirms ASEAN's relevance amid shifting Indo-Pacific dynamics. By projecting itself as a "norm entrepreneur," ASEAN uses AOIP to promote a cooperative rules-based regional order, a stance particularly significant in the context of the U.S.-China rivalry (Koga, 2022). While critics argue that AOIP risks being purely declaratory, it nonetheless carves out space for ASEAN to mediate strategic interests through normative engagement. The real potential of AOIP lies not in its ability to counterbalance great powers through force, but in its role in fostering inclusive dialogue and regional trust-building. If ASEAN can move from normative declarations to practical implementation, particularly in maritime cooperation and sustainable connectivity, AOIP could serve as a foundation for a uniquely Southeast Asian model of regional peace and stability (Acharya, 2021).

Since its adoption in 2019, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) has remained more a normative framework than a strategy with concrete impact on regional geopolitics. Despite its emphasis on inclusivity, openness, dialogue, and adherence to international law, AOIP has not significantly reshaped the behavior of major powers or even unified ASEAN's internal alignment toward Indo-Pacific issues. The current state of AOIP is marked by its

symbolic importance rather than practical influence. ASEAN has not yet transformed AOIP's guiding principles into actionable institutional mechanisms or binding commitments. Its primary contribution has been to reassert ASEAN centrality in a region dominated by external powers, but this influence is fragile, often limited to diplomatic forums rather than policy outcomes (Koga, 2022).

One major challenge has been the diversity of interests among ASEAN member states. While AOIP reflects a collective voice, ASEAN is composed of countries with divergent strategic alignments, economic dependencies, and security interests. For instance, Vietnam and the Philippines have been more assertive in maritime disputes with China, while Cambodia and Laos maintain closer ties with Beijing and often refrain from supporting strong language on South China Sea issues (Weatherbee, 2020). This divergence limits ASEAN's ability to act cohesively or to project AOIP as a united front. Furthermore, the vagueness of AOIP's content, designed deliberately to avoid offending any major power, dilutes its strategic value. Without clarity or enforcement, the AOIP risks being perceived as a lowest-common-denominator document rather than a blueprint for cooperation (Jain, 2021).

The response of ASEAN member states to AOIP also illustrates ambivalence. While governments publicly endorse AOIP and its principles, there is limited enthusiasm in translating it into national policy or allocating resources to advance its objectives. For example, Indonesia, which played a key role in initiating AOIP, has not followed up with concrete programs that could inspire broader regional uptake (Sukma, 2020). Similarly, Thailand, which chaired ASEAN during AOIP's adoption, has tended to pursue bilateral engagements with major powers through direct state-to-state arrangements rather than utilizing AOIP or ASEAN-led mechanisms as the primary platform for cooperation. This pattern of rhetorical support without material commitment reflects ASEAN's historical preference for non-interference and consensus, but it also undercuts AOIP's potential as a transformative regional framework.

AOIP's normative orientation, emphasizing dialogue, cooperation, and inclusiveness, is central to ASEAN diplomacy. However, in the face of escalating geopolitical tensions, this soft approach appears inadequate. Unlike FOIP, which is backed by security alliances, military presence, and economic partnerships like the Quad or IPEF, AOIP does not offer strategic guarantees or incentives. Its lack of enforcement mechanisms or dispute resolution tools makes it more aspirational than operational. This limits its ability to respond to challenges such as militarization of the South China Sea, grey-zone tactics, or coercive diplomacy. As a result, AOIP cannot deter aggressive behavior nor provide security assurances to member states (Acharya, 2021). In this context, AOIP is often overshadowed by more robust and institutionalized frameworks led by external powers.

Moreover, AOIP's capacity to shape regional norms is constrained by the fact that it operates within a weak institutional architecture. ASEAN itself is an intergovernmental organization without supranational authority, and its decision-making remains dependent on consensus. This institutional limitation reduces ASEAN's ability to impose common positions or hold member states accountable. AOIP, therefore, remains a vision rather than an actionable agenda. Without formal mechanisms for implementation or compliance, the outlook's reliance on voluntary cooperation and informal diplomacy severely limits its transformative potential (Koga, 2022). The absence of any publicly identified monitoring body or annual review mechanism further illustrates the static character of the AOIP.

The gap between AOIP's normative rhetoric and geopolitical reality is further highlighted by the fact that many of ASEAN's external partners have adopted Indo-Pacific strategies that do not necessarily align with AOIP. While countries like Japan, Australia, and the EU have expressed support for AOIP's principles, they often prefer to pursue their interests through bilateral or minilateral arrangements such as the Quad, rather than engaging through ASEAN-led mechanisms. This approach sidelines ASEAN as a regional convenor and raises questions about the effectiveness of AOIP in shaping the broader Indo-Pacific narrative. Consequently, ASEAN's insistence on centrality is increasingly challenged by the proliferation of overlapping and more actionable strategies in the region, strategies that frequently bypass or marginalise ASEAN's role. (Heydarian, 2020).

To be fair, AOIP has opened diplomatic space for cooperation on non-traditional security issues, such as maritime environmental protection, disaster resilience, and digital connectivity. These areas offer potential for ASEAN to build issue-specific partnerships and avoid the political sensitivities tied to hard security. For instance, ASEAN has launched maritime dialogues with Japan and India under the AOIP framework and initiated discussions on infrastructure connectivity and sustainable development. Yet, these initiatives remain small-scale and lack coordination. The broader strategic challenge is that these soft areas of cooperation do not address the power asymmetries or strategic anxieties that dominate the Indo-Pacific (Jain, 2021). ASEAN's failure to embed AOIP into a binding regional mechanism means that it cannot offer credible alternatives to external security structures.

In many ways, the AOIP encapsulates the strengths and weaknesses of ASEAN diplomacy: a commitment to peace, dialogue, and inclusivity, but a reluctance to confront power politics or impose discipline among its members. This approach has allowed ASEAN to remain neutral and avoid entanglement in great power competition, but it also exposes the limits of norm-based regionalism in a realist world. As the Indo-Pacific becomes more contested, the relevance of AOIP will depend on ASEAN's willingness to translate its values into policy instruments and institutional mechanisms. Without such a shift, AOIP may remain a diplomatic gesture rather than a strategic framework (Acharya, 2021).

This paper, therefore, examines AOIP as a normative vision without enforcement power, a "norm without power." While AOIP reflects ASEAN's aspiration to maintain regional centrality and project a cooperative Indo-Pacific order, it lacks the institutional tools, political will, and strategic coherence necessary to shape outcomes in a competitive regional environment. In doing so, this paper critically evaluates the extent to which normative frameworks like AOIP can influence power dynamics in the absence of hard capabilities or binding commitments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) falls within the broader scholarly conversation on ASEAN centrality, regionalism, and Indo-Pacific strategic frameworks. Much of the existing research evaluates AOIP as a normative response to the proliferation of great power strategies such as the U.S.-led Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and India's Act East Policy (Koga, 2022; Jain, 2021). Scholars widely recognize AOIP as ASEAN's attempt to reclaim relevance in shaping regional order through soft

power, dialogue, and inclusive development, rather than hard balancing or alliance-building (Acharya, 2021; Weatherbee, 2020).

One stream of literature analyzes AOIP from the lens of strategic hedging and soft balancing. For instance, Heydarian (2020) views AOIP as a diplomatic maneuver that seeks to maintain ASEAN autonomy in the face of growing U.S.-China rivalry. Others argue that AOIP symbolizes ASEAN's consistent preference for multilateralism and non-alignment, echoing its past initiatives such as the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and the East Asia Summit (Ba 2016). However, this literature tends to focus more on ASEAN's institutional behavior and less on the internal fragmentation and domestic reception of AOIP within individual member states.

A second strand of scholarship addresses AOIP as a normative project. Scholars such as Acharya (2021) and Koga (2022) argue that AOIP is a case of "normative regionalism," where ASEAN projects shared values of openness, cooperation, and international law to shape regional norms. Yet, much of this analysis remains at a descriptive or strategic level, with limited critical examination of AOIP's implementation or its impact on discourse among member states and external actors. There is a tendency in the literature to treat ASEAN as a unitary actor, thereby overlooking internal contestations, varied national interpretations, and the lack of coherence in applying AOIP's principles.

Additionally, limited empirical work exists that dissects the performative dimension of AOIP, particularly how it functions rhetorically in ASEAN meetings, policy statements, and bilateral diplomacy. There is also a noticeable gap in research examining AOIP through discourse or content analysis frameworks, which could help unpack the ideational and political tensions embedded in its formulation and projection.

This paper aims to address these gaps by critically analyzing AOIP not only as a normative declaration but as a discursive construction shaped by intra-ASEAN political dynamics, strategic anxieties, and institutional limitations. It does so by combining content analysis, discourse analysis, and process tracing to examine the evolution of AOIP texts, speeches, and statements, and how they reflect ASEAN's internal divisions and normative aspirations. In doing so, this work contributes to the growing literature on norm diffusion and contestation in Southeast Asia and interrogates the practical utility of norms without institutional enforcement.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design, using three complementary methods: content analysis, discourse analysis, and process tracing. Content Analysis is used to systematically examine official AOIP-related documents, including the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (2019), chairman's statements, ministerial declarations, and external partner responses. By coding recurring themes such as "inclusivity," "openness," "centrality," and "cooperation," the study identifies patterns in the language and framing strategies employed by ASEAN and its member states. Furthermore, Discourse Analysis complements content analysis by focusing on how AOIP is framed in policy speeches, summit remarks, and public diplomacy. It explores the performative role of language and how ASEAN constructs its identity and normative authority in the Indo-Pacific. Drawing from critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995), the study interrogates how concepts like "ASEAN centrality" are reproduced, contested, or sidelined across different national contexts and diplomatic interactions. Finally, Process

Tracing is applied to understand the evolution of AOIP from its inception through to its adoption and subsequent implementation efforts. This involves mapping key events, meetings, and turning points in AOIP's development, and identifying causal mechanisms and decisions that shaped its trajectory. It also assesses why certain normative principles were prioritized and how external pressures influenced ASEAN's strategic choices. These methods are all elaborated to provide a layered and holistic approach to analyzing AOIP, not only as a written text but as a political and diplomatic process. They enable a deeper understanding of how norms are constructed, diffused, and challenged in Southeast Asia's regional order.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: NORMS AND CONSTRUCTIVISM

This paper draws on the constructivist framework developed by Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, particularly their influential work on the "life cycle of norms" (1998). According to them, norms are "standards of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity." These norms emerge, cascade, and eventually internalize through dynamic processes involving norm entrepreneurs, political socialization, and institutionalization.

The AOIP, as a set of articulated principles, can be understood as a regional attempt at norm entrepreneurship, where ASEAN seeks to introduce and promote new standards of behavior in the Indo-Pacific, such as inclusivity, non-alignment, and cooperative security. In the "norm emergence" stage, norm entrepreneurs (e.g., Indonesia or ASEAN as an institution) advocate for new ideas through diplomatic channels. The AOIP reflects this phase, representing ASEAN's effort to frame a regional narrative amid competing hegemonic discourses from the U.S., China, and others.

However, as Finnemore and Sikkink argue, for norms to cascade and be internalized, they must be institutionalized through mechanisms that induce conformity either through persuasion, social incentives, or legal instruments. This is where AOIP struggles. It lacks enforcement mechanisms, monitoring structures, or binding commitments, preventing the norm cascade process from taking root. Moreover, the diversity of interests among ASEAN member states disrupts norm internalization, as there is no uniform commitment or shared perception of the AOIP's significance or urgency.

Constructivism also emphasizes the role of identity in shaping interest. ASEAN's identity as a consensus-driven, sovereignty-respecting regional body informs its reluctance to impose hard rules. As such, AOIP reflects not only normative aspirations but also ASEAN's identity performance on the regional stage, one that seeks to mediate great power rivalry while avoiding entanglement. This identity is both a strength (in preserving neutrality) and a limitation (in undermining institutional power).

By applying this framework, the paper argues that AOIP represents an incomplete or stalled norm cycle. It aspires to shape regional behavior, yet lacks the structural and institutional tools necessary to do so. AOIP is thus emblematic of a norm without power, an attempt at soft institutionalism in a region increasingly shaped by hard strategic interests.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) represents a significant attempt by ASEAN to assert its normative agency within a shifting and contested regional landscape. Positioned as an ideational alternative to major power-led frameworks like the U.S.-driven Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), AOIP articulates ASEAN's vision for an inclusive, rules-based, and cooperative regional order. Grounded in long-standing principles such as non-interference, consensus, and peaceful dialogue, AOIP functions as both a strategic narrative and a diplomatic tool. Yet, despite its discursive clarity, the framework remains trapped in the emergence phase of norm development, limited by structural constraints, institutional fragility, and internal divisions. The following chapters explore AOIP's normative foundations, the barriers to its institutionalization and enforcement, the political divergence among ASEAN member states, and the possibilities for its evolution into a more powerful framework through norm entrepreneurship, external partnerships, and incremental institutional development.

AOIP and Its Normative Framework

At its core, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) is a normative policy framework that articulates ASEAN's collective vision for the Indo-Pacific region, anchored in the principles of inclusivity, openness, development cooperation, and the rule of international law (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019). It is not a military alliance or strategic bloc; instead, it serves as a diplomatic and ideational initiative that seeks to define the Indo-Pacific through ASEAN's longstanding norms of peaceful dialogue, non-interference, mutual respect, and regional centrality (Dosch, 2020). As such, AOIP reflects a deliberate effort by ASEAN to reframe the regional discourse away from binary power competition and towards rules-based, multilateral engagement.

From a constructivist perspective, norms are socially constructed "standards of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity" (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 891). Rather than being driven solely by material interests, actors behave according to what is deemed legitimate and appropriate within a social context. AOIP embodies this dynamic, emerging as a normative response shaped by ASEAN's identity as a community of peacebuilders and conveners (Acharya, 2004; He, 2021). In defining the Indo-Pacific in inclusive and cooperative terms, ASEAN is asserting a vision of regional order that reflects its own institutional identity and normative preferences.

This normative positioning becomes more salient when contrasted with competing strategic visions such as the U.S.-led Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While both initiatives are framed in terms of economic development or security cooperation, they are widely perceived as mechanisms for geopolitical influence and strategic alignment. FOIP, for instance, emphasises freedom of navigation, the rule of law at sea, and partnerships among "like-minded" states, which implicitly sidelines actors that do not conform to Western liberal democratic norms (Koga, 2020; Medcalf, 2020). Conversely, the BRI

is driven by state-led infrastructure and investment but has raised concerns about debt dependence, lack of transparency, and the undermining of sovereignty in weaker states (Medcalf, 2020). In contrast, AOIP offers a third path, resisting alignment with any major power while promoting a normative framework grounded in mutual benefit and respect for sovereignty (Dosch, 2020; Reid, 2020).

In this context, the AOIP functions as an instrument of norm entrepreneurship, with ASEAN acting both as a collective identity and a regional actor attempting to shape the Indo-Pacific discourse. Through AOIP, ASEAN seeks to diffuse a set of regional norms that emphasize peaceful coexistence, dialogue, and economic cooperation, rather than security competition or exclusive alliances (Acharya, 2021). This is consistent with ASEAN's historical pattern of normative agency, wherein it relies on ideational leadership, rather than coercive power, to shape regional behavior (Acharya, 2004; Björkdahl, 2008).

However, while the AOIP clearly represents a norm emergence effort, it has not progressed into the subsequent phases of norm development cascade and internalisation as theorised by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998). The absence of strong norm entrepreneurs sustained diplomatic advocacy, or institutional mechanisms to socialise and implement its principles has hindered its broader diffusion. Although Indonesia played a central role in conceptualising and advocating for the AOIP (Sukma, 2020), the effort has not been followed by coordinated or systematic norm promotion across ASEAN member states or external partners (Haacke, 2021; Narine, 2020).

As a result, the AOIP's normative framework remains largely aspirational and declarative, lacking the political traction or institutional depth to reshape actual regional behaviour. Its role is more symbolic than constitutive; it defines what ASEAN hopes the Indo-Pacific should look like, but without robust mechanisms for turning that vision into practice (Caballero-Anthony, 2019; Goh, 2016). This inertia reflects deeper structural limitations in ASEAN's norm-setting capacity, including its consensus-based institutional design and the divergent interests of its member states.

In sum, while the AOIP is a valuable normative intervention that reaffirms ASEAN's vision of a cooperative and inclusive Indo-Pacific, it remains entrenched in the emergence phase of norm evolution. Without sustained entrepreneurship, internal alignment, or external buy-in, its impact will continue to be discursively significant but behaviourally limited.

The Structural Limitation of AOIP

Constructivist theory emphasises that norms do not operate in isolation from material conditions or institutional realities. Instead, they are embedded within specific structural contexts, which include institutional design, political identity, power asymmetries, and regional hierarchies (Finnemore, 1996; Katzenstein, 1996). According to this logic, the emergence and diffusion of norms depend not only on ideational entrepreneurship but also on the structural conditions that enable or constrain their adoption and internalisation. In the case of the ASEAN Outlook on the

Indo-Pacific (AOIP), its normative ambition is hindered by structural limitations stemming both from ASEAN's internal institutional architecture and the geopolitical configuration of the broader Indo-Pacific. These constraints explain why AOIP remains discursively significant but institutionally and behaviorally weak.

One of the most significant internal limitations is ASEAN's commitment to consensus and non-interference, which, while essential to its identity and historical function, have long constrained its ability to engage in effective norm enforcement or deep institutionalisation (Acharya, 2004; Goh, 2016). These principles, enshrined in the ASEAN Way, promote harmony, equal sovereignty, and avoidance of open conflict among member states. However, they also inhibit the development of strong compliance mechanisms or collective responses, especially when political interests diverge. Consequently, ASEAN's norms including those proposed in the AOIP tend to remain soft, declarative, and non-binding. As Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) argue, norms gain strength when institutionalized through socialization, legal codification, or material incentives. AOIP lacks such enforcement pathways, making its normative proposals vulnerable to rhetorical appropriation without behavioral follow-through.

This structural conservatism is compounded by ASEAN's weak institutional capacity. Unlike the European Union, ASEAN does not possess a strong secretariat or supranational authority capable of coordinating or monitoring member state behavior. The Secretariat's budget is modest, its mandate limited, and its authority largely dependent on the voluntary cooperation of member states (Narine, 2020). As a result, initiatives like the AOIP are rarely backed by formal implementation strategies, technical roadmaps, or accountability frameworks. While AOIP does include references to cooperation in maritime security, infrastructure, and the Sustainable Development Goals, it does not spell out mechanisms or institutional bodies to realize these objectives (Haacke, 2021). The absence of follow-through instruments reflects both institutional inertia and political caution within ASEAN's multilateral design.

Externally, AOIP is constrained by the larger geopolitical structure of the Indo-Pacific, characterized by intensifying great power competition, particularly between the United States and China. These powers have articulated competing regional visions the U.S.'s Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that are backed by substantial strategic, military, and economic resources. FOIP, often supported by the Quad grouping (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States), includes military exercises, defense dialogues, and investment packages (Koga, 2020). Similarly, the BRI has invested over \$1 trillion globally in connectivity and infrastructure projects, extending China's material footprint and political leverage across Asia (Medcalf, 2020). In contrast, AOIP offers no such strategic incentives, making it a low-cost narrative appealing to endorse but lacking the material infrastructure to be operationalized in practice (Dosch, 2020; Caballero-Anthony, 2019).

Furthermore, ASEAN's structural position within this power matrix limits its capacity to mediate or lead. As Goh (2016) argues, ASEAN's role is often reduced to that of a "limited broker", caught between major power agendas and constrained by its own institutional weaknesses. Even when ASEAN articulates a normative vision, like that embedded in AOIP, it struggles to compete with the strategic enticements offered by great powers. This results in what Björkdahl

(2008) describes as “normative marginalization”, where small or middle actors produce norms but lack the structural power to diffuse or institutionalize them effectively.

In summary, while AOIP represents an ideational initiative that aspires to preserve ASEAN centrality and regional autonomy, it is structurally underpowered. Internally, ASEAN’s identity-based commitments to non-interference and consensus inhibit norm enforcement; externally, its normative voice is drowned out by materially robust great power strategies. The result is a symbolic normative document that is relatively easy to adopt rhetorically, but difficult to transform into operational or institutional reality.

ASEAN’s Internal Divisions

A central impediment to the effective diffusion and internalization of norms in the AOIP framework is the lack of internal coherence among ASEAN member states. While the AOIP aspires to project a unified normative vision of inclusivity, cooperation, and adherence to international law, its traction is undercut by the deep political, economic, and strategic divergences among its ten member states. From a constructivist standpoint, norms are not universally accepted or automatically diffused; instead, they are contested, reinterpreted, or resisted based on national identity, domestic priorities, and institutional configurations (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Checkel, 1999). As Finnemore and Sikkink (1998, p. 888) emphasize, “norms do not float freely” they are embedded in the particular cultural and political contexts of each actor. Within ASEAN, these contexts are not uniform, leading to different interpretations and prioritizations of AOIP’s normative commitments.

This internal heterogeneity is especially apparent in the realm of strategic and security policy, where ASEAN states maintain differing threat perceptions and external alignments. For example, Vietnam and the Philippines have adopted more assertive positions in response to China’s growing maritime assertiveness in the South China Sea. Both have sought closer strategic ties with the United States and other Quad members, signaling a preference for stronger deterrence and legal instruments rooted in international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Weatherbee, 2020; Ba, 2016). In contrast, countries like Cambodia and Laos, whose economies are deeply entangled with Chinese investment and aid under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), tend to downplay regional tensions and avoid criticizing Beijing (Medcalf, 2020). These divisions create a normative dissonance that weakens ASEAN’s collective ability to act on AOIP principles, especially in matters relating to sovereignty, maritime governance, and external partnerships.

Moreover, internal political systems within ASEAN vary significantly, ranging from consolidated democracies like Indonesia and the Philippines to authoritarian regimes such as Vietnam, Laos, and Brunei. These regime differences affect how AOIP’s values particularly those related to openness, inclusivity, and rule of law are perceived, prioritized, or even contested. Acharya (2004) notes that ASEAN norms often require “localisation” adaptation to the domestic political and cultural milieu before they can be embraced at the national level. However, when such

localisation processes result in selective interpretation or dilution of shared norms, the collective normative framework becomes fragile. In this case, AOIP functions more as a broad diplomatic narrative than a unifying behavioural guide.

This divergence also undermines ASEAN's ability to engage in normative persuasion or peer socialisation, key mechanisms for norm internalisation in constructivist theory. Checkel (1999) argues that socialisation is most effective when actors operate in dense institutional environments where they are subject to normative pressure and repeated interaction. In ASEAN, however, the institutional setting is loosely coupled, and decision-making is governed by the non-interference principle, which discourages member states from pressuring each other to conform to shared norms (Narine, 2020). As a result, even when AOIP is adopted at the rhetorical level, there is limited follow-up through policy alignment, capacity-building, or norm enforcement.

The consequence is a situation in which AOIP lacks the internal coherence necessary for norm cascade or internalisation. Norms may emerge in elite discourse, but without a shared understanding, domestic institutionalisation, or collective political will, they fail to consolidate. This reflects what Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) describe as a stalling of the norm life cycle at the emergence phase where norms are articulated but do not progress into socialised or routinised behaviour. In this respect, ASEAN's internal divisions are not simply a matter of differing interests, but a structural limitation that fundamentally impedes the success of AOIP as a normative framework.

Lack of Institutionalisation and Enforcement Mechanism

One of the most critical shortcomings of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) as a normative framework is its lack of institutionalisation and enforcement capacity. While ASEAN has framed the AOIP as a strategic vision grounded in norms of openness, inclusivity, and cooperation, it has failed to establish the necessary institutional structures to embed these norms within regional governance mechanisms. According to Finnemore and Sikkink's norm life cycle model (1998), the successful trajectory of a norm involves its progression from emergence, to cascade where it gains legitimacy through institutional adoption and finally to internalization, where the norm becomes embedded in bureaucratic practice and social expectations. In the case of AOIP, this cycle has been arrested at the emergence phase, largely due to the absence of robust institutional anchoring.

Despite its rhetorical prominence, AOIP is not backed by any dedicated implementation body, monitoring agency, or institutional reporting framework. ASEAN has invoked the AOIP in various summit declarations and regional dialogues, but these mentions are typically symbolic affirmations rather than steps toward operationalisation (Koga, 2022; Jain, 2021). There is no clear roadmap, no quantifiable indicators, and no budget attached to the realisation of AOIP's objectives. For example, although AOIP outlines cooperation in areas such as maritime security, connectivity, and sustainable development, these priorities remain vague and unprioritized in ASEAN's broader policy planning documents (Haacke, 2021). Without formal bureaucratic

ownership or institutional mechanisms, AOIP norms remain discursively expressed but practically inert.

This institutional void reflects ASEAN's broader normative design, which privileges flexibility, informality, and consensus over legalism and enforcement. While this structure has historically helped ASEAN manage diversity and preserve cohesion, it also imposes significant constraints on norm implementation. As Goh (2016) observes, ASEAN's institutional architecture is "thin" and "shallow," lacking both the authority and the autonomy needed to translate collective declarations into binding regional action. In the case of AOIP, this institutional fragility prevents the framework from influencing member state behavior or regional strategic alignments in any meaningful way.

The absence of enforcement mechanisms also reveals the limits of ASEAN's normative power in shaping the Indo-Pacific order. Without material incentives, legal commitments, or peer accountability mechanisms, AOIP norms cannot function as reliable guides for state behaviour. This deficiency reinforces what Acharya (2021) describes as "normative underreach", where regional actors articulate high-level norms but fail to invest in the institutional scaffolding needed for their implementation and socialisation. Instead of becoming operational frameworks, such norms risk devolving into discursive placeholders tools used to signal ASEAN's relevance, rather than to shape outcomes.

In this light, AOIP appears to function primarily as a discursive shield rather than a strategic blueprint. It enables ASEAN to navigate geopolitical contestation particularly between the United States and China without taking sides or making binding commitments. This is consistent with constructivist accounts of the performative role of norms, where discursive expressions of identity can serve as instruments of diplomatic positioning rather than behavioral regulation (Katzenstein, 1996; Björkdahl, 2008). AOIP projects regional identity and centrality, but it does not mandate conformity or generate policy consequences. It offers expectations, but not obligations making it more of a symbolic regime than an operational institution.

In short, the lack of institutionalisation and enforcement mechanisms has confined AOIP to the realm of rhetorical diplomacy. Without structured pathways for adoption, monitoring, or internalisation, AOIP remains an aspirational framework a normative vision without the bureaucratic muscle to turn ideas into practice. This reinforces the argument that, despite its discursive coherence, AOIP has stalled in the emergence phase of norm development and lacks the institutional depth necessary to influence regional behavior.

Can AOIP Evolve into a More Powerful Framework?

Although the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) currently functions more as a normative vision than a binding policy framework, its evolution into a more robust and consequential architecture is not precluded. From a constructivist standpoint, norms can evolve through the strategic efforts of norm entrepreneurs, the persuasive power of socialisation mechanisms, and the careful framing of normative narratives to align with broader regional

interests and identities (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Acharya, 2004). In this regard, the future of AOIP hinges not only on ASEAN's ability to maintain discursive relevance, but also on its willingness and capacity to reframe, institutionalise, and externalise its normative principles through strategic collaboration with like-minded regional actors.

A critical factor in this potential transformation lies in the support offered by middle powers such as Japan, India, Australia, and the European Union, which have all, to varying degrees, expressed alignment with the values embedded in the AOIP. Japan, in particular, has demonstrated a deliberate effort to align its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept with AOIP's core principles of openness, inclusivity, and regional ownership (Jain, 2021; Koga, 2022). Rather than viewing AOIP and FOIP as competing visions, Japan has sought to bridge the two, using its diplomatic engagements and foreign aid instruments to promote connectivity and rules-based cooperation that reflect ASEAN's normative outlook. This suggests that AOIP has the potential to become a normative anchor for middle powers seeking an alternative to the U.S.-China dichotomy provided ASEAN can seize this opening.

In this context, these external actors can serve as "norm enablers" (Björkdahl, 2008), amplifying AOIP's visibility and substance through concrete initiatives, such as infrastructure cooperation, maritime capacity-building, and multilateral security dialogues. However, the success of this amplification depends significantly on ASEAN's internal leadership and coherence. It requires ASEAN not just to passively welcome external support but to actively orchestrate partnerships and empower member states capable of driving the AOIP agenda. Countries such as Indonesia and Singapore, both of which possess relatively strong diplomatic networks and normative leadership capacities, could act as regional norm entrepreneurs translating AOIP from aspirational rhetoric into operational strategy (Sukma, 2020; Acharya, 2021). This would entail ASEAN delegating greater political space to these actors to engage with external partners and lead in designing implementation frameworks, a shift that would challenge ASEAN's traditional consensus-driven culture but could yield significant normative dividends.

Institutional development also presents a viable path for AOIP's consolidation. Rather than attempting to formalise AOIP as a treaty or rigid doctrine something likely to be resisted by some member states ASEAN could adopt an issue-based, incremental approach. One possible strategy would be the establishment of dedicated working groups on key thematic areas outlined in AOIP, such as maritime cooperation, disaster response, sustainable infrastructure, and digital connectivity. These platforms would serve as operational entry points where norm diffusion can occur through functional cooperation and routine interaction, consistent with Checkel's (1999) theory of socialisation through embedded institutional processes.

Moreover, the institutionalisation of AOIP principles could be advanced through the creation of annual review mechanisms embedded within existing ASEAN-led platforms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) or ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+). This would enable ASEAN and its partners to assess progress, identify gaps, and foster accountability. To avoid overburdening ASEAN's limited institutional capacity, such mechanisms could be supported by partner co-funding schemes or joint secretariats involving dialogue partners. This approach

would enhance norm internalisation by linking AOIP's rhetorical commitments to performance indicators and resource allocation, thereby increasing the framework's practical relevance.

Nevertheless, these pathways are not without challenges. They would require ASEAN to re-express its collective identity, which has historically been defined by principles such as non-interference, sovereignty preservation, and institutional informality (Acharya, 2004; Goh, 2016). For AOIP to evolve into a meaningful strategic framework, ASEAN would need to shift at least partially toward a norm advocacy model with tangible impact, one that accepts a higher degree of institutional commitment and normative leadership. This identity shift would not necessitate abandoning ASEAN's foundational values but would involve strategically adapting them to meet the demands of a rapidly changing Indo-Pacific security and governance landscape.

In sum, while the current iteration of AOIP is limited in scope and impact, its normative foundations offer fertile ground for further development. Through strategic partnerships, issue-based institutionalisation, and the empowerment of regional norm entrepreneurs, AOIP can evolve beyond its present role as a discursive buffer into a functional normative framework. However, this evolution is contingent on ASEAN's willingness to reconfigure its internal logic of action, from symbolic cohesion to normative influence backed by action.

CONCLUSION

Through the lens of constructivist theory, especially Finnemore and Sikkink's norm life cycle model, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) illustrates a stalled normative initiative. While it successfully articulates a regional vision grounded in openness, inclusivity, and peaceful dialogue, it remains trapped in the emergence phase. The AOIP lacks institutional mechanisms, concrete programs, and enforceable commitments, rendering it discursively rich but operationally weak. ASEAN's own principles of non-interference and consensus, combined with internal diversity and strategic divergence among member states, further hinder the development of a unified normative agenda.

Despite these setbacks, AOIP still holds potential. Its revival depends on ASEAN's ability to demonstrate normative leadership, nurture internal norm entrepreneurs, and create issue-based institutional frameworks. External actors like Japan, Australia, and the EU can support this process, but only if ASEAN strengthens its internal coherence and commits to moving beyond symbolic diplomacy. Without such steps, AOIP risks remaining a "low-cost narrative" rather than a meaningful framework for regional order.

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